**From Emptiness to Presence: Buddhist Meditative Emptying and Islamic Devotional Focusing as Two Paths Toward the Ultimate Reality**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the profound convergence between Buddhist meditative "emptying" (*suññatā-bhāvanā*) and Islamic devotional "focusing" (*tawḥīd* and *ʿibādah*) as complementary pathways toward the realization of Ultimate Reality. Drawing from primary texts—the Pāli Canon, the Qur'an, and classical Islamic literature—the study argues that both traditions, although methodologically distinct, aim at dissolving the illusion of the ego, transcending psychological constructs, and encountering the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). The article further posits that the Nusantara spiritual synthesis provides a unique intellectual landscape for this dialogue, where traditions of *suwung* (emptiness) and tauhidic awareness interact harmoniously.

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**Introduction**

Across the world religions, the human quest for the Ultimate Reality often takes two major forms:

**Via Negativa (the emptying of illusion)** — representing Buddhism's radical phenomenology of *anattā* (non-self) and *suññatā* (emptiness);

**Via Affirmativa (the focusing upon the Real)** — represented by Islam's *tawḥīd* and acts of worship oriented toward *al-Ḥaqq*, the Unchanging Reality.

Although these approaches appear opposite—one negating self, the other affirming the Real—this study argues that they converge in their ultimate intention: the transcendence of the constructed ego (*nafs*, *attā*, *ahaṅkāra*) and union with or realization of the Ultimate Reality: the Unconditioned (*asaṅkhata*) in Buddhism and *al-Ḥaqq* in Islam.

The conceptual synthesis stands in deep resonance with Nusantara spirituality—especially the Javanese notion of **suwung** (emptiness beyond emptiness), in which the True Self (*Sejatining Hurip*) reveals itself through the dissolution of the constructed self. The Nusantara lens uniquely integrates Buddhist, Hindu, Sufi, and indigenous metaphysics, creating an interpretive space where emptiness and presence are not opposites but complementary movements of the soul.

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**I. Buddhist Meditative Emptying: Dissolving the Illusion of Self**

**1. The Buddhist Analysis of the Self as Illusion**

Buddhism's foundational teaching asserts that what we ordinarily call "self" is merely a composite of impermanent processes (*skandhas* or *khandhas*). In *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59), the Buddha states:

"This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self."

The self (*attā*) is a constructed narrative emerging from craving, ignorance, and psychological proliferation (*papañca*). Meditation (*bhāvanā*) is designed to reveal this illusion by direct observation.

**2. Emptiness (*Suññatā*) as the Heart of Meditation**

The *Suññata Suttas* in the Majjhima Nikāya describe emptying not as nihilism, but as the stripping away of false attributions:

"The world is empty because it is empty of a self and what belongs to a self." (SN 35.85)

Through deep meditative absorption, practitioners perceive that thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and even consciousness are transient. The Javanese concept *suwung* resonates strongly here—not emptiness as absence, but as the clearing of all that is false, so the **Real** may reveal itself.

**3. The Encounter with the Unconditioned**

The culmination of Buddhist meditation is the realization of *Nibbāna*, described in *Udāna* 8.3:

"There is, monks, the Unborn, Unbecome, Unmade, Unconditioned."

This mirrors the idea that beyond the flux of conditioned reality there exists an Ultimate Ground. Buddhism refrains from naming it as a deity but affirms its reality and necessity for liberation.

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**II. Islamic Devotional Focusing: Dissolving the Ego through Al-Ḥaqq**

**1. The Nafs as Constructed Illusion**

Islamic spirituality, especially in the Qur'an and Sufism, presents the *nafs* as the seat of illusion:

*Nafs al-ammārah* (the commanding self) — Qur'an 12:53

*Nafs al-lawwāmah* (the self-reproaching) — Qur'an 75:2

*Nafs al-muṭma'innah* (the tranquil self) — Qur'an 89:27

These states are **impermanent psychological constructs**, not the deepest reality of human existence.

**2. Tawḥīd as Focusing on the Only Real**

*Surat al-Ikhlāṣ* (112) describes the Ultimate Reality:

"He is Allah, the One.
Allah, the Eternal Refuge.
He neither begets nor is begotten.
Nothing is comparable to Him."

This non-anthropomorphic description parallels *Udāna* 8.3's "Unconditioned." Tawḥīd is thus not merely doctrinal; it is **existential focus on the one Reality that truly IS**.

**3. Worship (*'ibādah*) as the Training of Presence**

Prayer (*ṣalāh*) is described as:

“The remembrance of Allah is greater.” (Q 29:45)

Sufis interpret this as directing the heart toward the Real until all illusions dissolve. This is not ego-affirming; it is ego-dissolving. Al-Ghazālī describes worship as:

“The extinguishing of the self in the light of the Real.”

Thus, devotion is not petition but orientation—an “arrowing” toward the Real (*tawajjuh ilā al-Ḥaqq*).

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**III. Two Paths, One Destination: Emptiness and Presence**

**1. Emptying the False Self vs. Focusing on the True Real**

In Buddhism:

One dissolves the self to see reality as it is.

In Islam (especially Sufism):

One dissolves the self through absorption in the Divine.

Both involve **the annihilation of illusion**:

*anattā* (non-self)

*fanāʾ* (annihilation in God)

Both traditions move from illusion to the Real:

*suññatā* → *asaṅkhata*

*fanāʾ* → *baqāʾ bi-llāh*

**2. The Convergence in Nusantara Spirituality**

The Javanese *suwung* expresses this unity:

“Suwung tanpa suwung,”
“Emptiness beyond emptiness,”
where the True Life (*Sejatining Hurip*) shines.

Here, emptiness (Buddhist) and presence (Islamic) converge in a uniquely Nusantara metaphysics where the Real is approached through both negation and affirmation.

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**IV. Textual Parallels**

**Buddhist Texts**

*Udāna* 8.3 — the Unconditioned

*SN* 22.59 — non-self

*SN* 35.85 — the empty world

**Islamic Texts**

*Surat al-Ikhlāṣ* — the Absolute One

Qur’an 29:45 — remembrance as highest act

Qur’an 12:53, 75:2, 89:27 — psychological stages of the self

These texts show that both traditions demand the dissolution of illusion and the realization of the Real.

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**Conclusion**

Although Buddhism and Islam appear methodologically distinct—Buddhism emptying the mind, Islam focusing the heart—they converge in ultimate orientation. Both aim to dissolve the ego, transcend illusion, and allow the practitioner to encounter or abide in the Ultimate Reality: the *asaṅkhata* in Buddhism and *al-Ḥaqq* in Islam.

Nusantara spirituality, through the concept of *suwung*, reveals that these two movements are not opposites but complementary: emptiness makes space for the Real, and devotion directs consciousness toward the Real. Together, they form a profound dialogue of spiritual universality—two rivers flowing into the same ocean of Ultimate Being.

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